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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the levels of language proficiency and language anxiety of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learners. The goals of the study were: (1) to determine the effect of gender differences and learner specialization on levels of English language anxiety; (2) to study the relationship between gender differences and academic specialization in language testing anxiety; (3) to discover whether ESL learners' language proficiency level is influenced by their language anxiety level; and (4) to investigate the relationship between ESL learners' language anxiety test scores and their language proficiency test scores. The Test Anxiety Inventory, Tanta University English Language Proficiency Test for College Freshmen, and the Tanta University English Language Proficiency Test of English Syntax were administered to 731 college ESL learners in Egypt. Research findings indicated significant differences between male ESL learners and female ESL learners. Results indicated a significant interaction between gender differences and specialization in language anxiety. ESL learners with high language anxiety levels tended to do poorly on language tests, whereas ESL learners with low language anxiety levels seemed to perform successfully on the language tests used. (36 references) (Author/DJD)

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Language Anxiety and Language Proficiency Among EFL/ESL Learners at University Level: An Exploratory Investigation

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Language Anxiety and Language Proficiency Among EFL/ESL Learners at University Level: An Exploratory Investigation

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ABSTRACT

The present research work was intended as an exploratory investigation which was designed to study EFL and ESL learners language anxiety and language proficiency level. More specifically, its purposes were: 1) to determine the extent to which levels of English language anxiety differ as a function of sex and learners' specialization; 2) to study interaction between sex and academic specialization in language testing anxiety; 3) to know whether or not EFL/ESL learners' language proficiency level is influenced by EFL/ESL learners' language anxiety level; and 4) to investigate the relationship between EFL/ESL learners' language anxiety test scores and language proficiency test scores. The Test Anxiety Inventory, Tanta University English Language Proficiency Test for College Freshmen, and Tanta University English Language Proficiency Test of English Syntax were administered to a total sample of 731 college EFL/ESL learners at Kafr-El-Sheikh, Tanta, Mansoura, Alexandria, and Ain Shams Faculties of Education in 1986. The data obtained were subjected to some statistical procedures. These were: Two Way Analysis of Variance, Newman-Keuls Test, the T-test for Independent Samples, and Pearson's Correlation Coefficients. Research finding disclosed significant differences between male EFL/ESL learners and female EFL/ESL learners in language anxiety in favor of the latter. Significant differences were also revealed between ESL learners and EFL learners in language anxiety in favor of the latter. Results indicated significant interaction between sex and specialization in language anxiety. EFL/ESL learners with high language anxiety levels tended to do poorly on language tests whereas EFL/ESL learners with low language anxiety level seemed to perform successfully on the language tests used. Finally, Pearson's Correlation Coefficients for language anxiety test scores and language proficiency test scores were negative as well as weak. Discussion of the results includes possible reasons for the findings. (5 Tables are included)

INTRODUCTION

Schools and colleges are the most common users of tests (Strenio, 1989; Gullickson, 1984). Research work on test anxiety and EFL/ESL learners' language proficiency has prospered because testing situations have high importance and face validity for learners. This is especially true for those who study at schools and colleges or those who may be subjected to evaluations of intellectual skills and performance. Consequently, it is not amazing that researchers find the performance evaluation situation a useful one for investigating the consequences of anxiety.

In spite of the significance of the English language, many capable EFL learners avoid taking English language courses in schools and colleges. Many other learners fail to perform well in English and do not attain the English language proficiency that would expand the range of job opportunities available to them.

One concept utilized to explain English language avoidance and poor performance is that of language anxiety. A large number of EFL/ESL learners claim to have a mental block against learning a foreign or second language, although these same learners may be good learners in other situations, well motivated, and have a genuine liking for speakers of English. What, then, impedes them

from attaining their desired goal? In many cases, they may have an anxiety reaction which prevents their ability to do well in a foreign or second language class. Just as anxiety impedes some learners from performing successfully in science or mathematics (Tobias, 1076; Stent, 1977, Betz, 1978; Morris, Kellaway & Smith, 1978; Richardson & Woolfolk, 1980; and Resnick et al., 1982), many learners find foreign/second language learning, especially in classroom situations, stressful and anxiety invoking.

EFL/ESL anxiety frequently shows up in testing situations. Learners commonly report to teachers that they "know" a certain structural point but "forget" it during a test. The learner comprehends, usually some time after the test that he/she knew the right answer, but put down the wrong one because of anxiety and nervousness. In this concern, it may seem necessary to cite some statements collected by counselors at the Learning Skills Center at the University of Texas, Austin (Horwitz et al, 1986):

> * I just know I have some kind of disability. I can't learn a foreign language no matter how hard I try.
> * When I'm in my Spanish class I just freeze! I can't think of a thing when my teacher calls on me. My mind goes blank.

Anxiety has been defined as "a state of apprehension, a vague fear that is only indirectly associated with an object."(Hilgard et al., 1971) Spielberger (1983) of the University of South Florida also defined anxiety as "a subjective feel-

ing of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system." When anxiety is restricted to the language learning situation, it falls into the category of specific anxiety reactions. Psychologists use the term specific anxiety reactions to differentiate between learners who are generally anxious in a number of situations and those who are anxious only in specific situations. Researchers have identified several specific anxieties pertinent to school tasks such as test taking and to academic subjects such as mathematics or science (Tobias, 1978, Richardson & Woolfolk, 1980; and Mallow, 1981).

Currently, EFL/ESL language investigators and theorists are aware that anxiety is often related to language learning. Therefore, there is great concern in the psychological motivation of adult foreign/second language learners, especially in terms of the learners' relationship to their teacher and their learning environment. This concern has encouraged the development of various new methods: among them, the Silent Way (Gattagno, 1982), Counseling-Learning (Curran, 1976), and Suggestopedia (Lozano, 1973). As Stevick (1976) has maintained, these methods are to be commended in that they recognize the importance of affective motivation in the task of foreign/second language learning. It is fair to claim that all of these methods are concerned with controlling and regulating affective motivation, in

particular, anxiety.

In his 1978 review of the anxiety research in foreign/second language learning, Scovel (1978) contends that scholars have not been able to establish a clear-cut relationship between anxiety and overall foreign language proficiency. He ascribes the discrepant findings at least in part to the inconsistency of anxiety measures used and concludes that "it is perhaps premature to relate it [anxiety] to the global and comprehensive task of language acquisition."

Research works pursuing more specific effects of anxiety on language learning have been more revealing. Kleinmann (1972) found that ESL learners with high levels of debilitating anxiety attempted different kinds of grammatical constructions than did less anxious ESL learners. Steinberg and Horwitz (1984) found that learners experiencing an anxiety-producing condition attempted less interpretive messages than those experiencing a relaxed condition. These research works indicate that anxiety can affect the communication strategies learners employ in language classes. That is, the more anxious learner tends to avoid attempting difficult messages in the target language. These results are also consistent with research on other types of specific communication anxiety. Investigators (Daly & Miller, 1975; and Daly, 1977) studying writing in a native language, have

found that learners with higher levels of writing anxiety write shorter compositions and qualify their writing less that their calmer counterparts do.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The present research work is designed as an exploratory investigation of EFL/ESL learners' language anxiety and their language proficiency. More specifically, four main goals are set forth in undertaking this study. The first objective is to determine the extent to which levels of English language anxiety differ as a function of sex and a learner's specialization. That is, learners studying English as a subsidiary or supplementary course in their academic program of study [EFL]; and learners studying English as their area of concentration or specialization [ESL]. The second objective is to determine correlations between learners' sex, specialization (EFL/ESL) and language anxiety level. The third objective is to ascertain whether or not EFL/ESL learners' language performance is effected by their anxiety level. Finally, an attempt will be made to investigate the relationship between EFL/ESL learners' language anxiety scores and language proficiency scores.

METHOD

Subjects: Two groups of subjects, a total of 731 EFL/ESL learners were utilized in the present study; all subjects were

students a Kafr-El-Sheikh, Tanta, Mansoura, Alexandria, and Ain Shams Faculties of Education. The first group consisted of 259 EFL subjects, 115 males and 144 females eenrolled in the departments of Arabic, Biology and Mathematics and studying English as a supplementary course. The second group included 472 ESL subjects, 224 males and 248 females from the English departments in the participating Faculties. EFL/ESL subjects in the two groups were primarily freshmen.

Instruments: A review of literature revealed no instrument specifically designed to assess EFL/ESL learners' language anxiety. Therefore, test anxiety was assessed using the Test Anxiety Inventory (TAI), an instrument developed by C. D. Spielberger (1977) of the University of South Florida and standardized on Egyptian samples by M.A. El-Tayeb (1984) of Tanta University. The TAI was also used in some Egyptian studies)El-Tayeb, 1984). The TAI consists of 20 statements pertaining to feelings and reactions while taking tests; responses are obtained on a 4-point Likert scale; response categories are: 1) Almost never. 2) Sometimes. 3) Often. 4) Almost always. Scores may range from 20 to 80, and higher scores indicate higher levels of anxiety. Both the validity and the reliability of the test were estimated (El-Tayeb, 1984, pp. 28-43).

The TAI items underwent some adaptation by this author and

EFL/ESL subjects were informed that whenever they find the word "test", it refers to English language tests. To clarify, the TAI was originally in English and later translated into Arabic by M.A. El-Tayeb, Professor of Psychology. The translation from English into Arabic was considered feasible so as to avoid misinterpretation of the statements resulting from an inadequate knowledge of the terminology used in the original. Moreover, it was regarded as time-saving for the respondents; they did not have to figure out the meaning of the statements. All instructions, of course, were in Arabic.

EFL learners' language proficiency level was measured utilizing Tanta University Language Proficiency Test of English Syntax for Non-Native Speakers of English (El-Banna, 1989). It consists of 100 items of the multiple-choice variety; it measures EFL subjects' manipulation of the different grammatical structures of the English language. The test was used in some studies and its validity and reliability were estimated (El-Ba , 1989, p. 9).

ESL learners' language proficiency was assessed using Tanta University English Language Proficiency Test for College Freshmen (El-Banna, 1983). It is of the multiple-choice type and consists of 50 items assessing different language skills. These are: 1) determining the main idea of the content; 2)understanding content

stated explicitly; 3) drawing conclusions from the content; 4) understanding the syntactical patterns of the content; and 5) determining the meaning of words from the context. The test is both valid and reliable and has been used in some studies (El-Banna, 1983, p.118-123).

TESTS ADMINISTRATION

Before administering the Test Anxiety Inventory, the subjects were informed that the investigator's purpose of the study was a constructive endeavor aimed primarily at understanding and helping. Subjects were also encouraged to respond candidly and freely to the TAI. Moreover, assurance was given that the information obtained as well as the test results will remain confidential and will be respected by the researcher. In brief, the three tests employed in this study were administered to the subjects in different sessions in the different participating faculties in 1986 as follows:

1) The Test of Anxiety Inventory was administered to all subjects;

2) Tanta University Language Proficiency Test of English Syntax was given to EFL subjects; and

3) Tanta University English Proficiency Test for College Freshmen was administered to ESL subjects.

ANALYSIS OF DATA AND RESULTS

The data obtained were subjected to some statistical procedures. These were: Two Way Analysis of Variance Design (Hinkle et al., 1979, p. 296); Newman-Keuls Test (Hinkle et al., 1979, p. 275); the T-test for Independent Samples with equal numbers, and the T-test for Independent Samples with unequal numbers (Hinkle et al., 1979, pp. 216-218); and Pearson's Correlation Coefficients (Hinkle et al., 1979, p. 75). Four null hypotheses were formulated to be tested.

Hypothesis One: There is no significant difference in the mean scores of subjects on the basis of sex and specialization (EFL/ESL) in language anxiety.

ANOVA (2 x 2) in Table 1 revealed statistically significant mean differences at the .001 level between male EFL/ESL learners and female EFL/ESL learners. Significant mean differences at the .001 level were also found between ESL and EFL learners. The F ratio obtained for the differences was large enough to reject the first null hypothesis as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. ANOVA (2 x 2) Results for EFL/ESL Learners' Language Anxiety Scores Classified by Sex and Specialization

Source of Variance	SS	df	MS	F
Sex (A)	23526.8	1	23526.8	228.86***
Specialization (B)	10645.89	1	10645.89	103.56***
A x B	1090.36	1	1090.36	10.61***
Within Groups	74738.78	727	102.80	

*** P < .001.

To study further the direction of differences, Newman-Keuls Test was performed on the data as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2. Mean Difference Between Males and Females in Language Anxiety level Using Newman-Keuls Test

Sex Means	Males 42.23	Females 54.14
Males 42.23	zero	11.91**
Females 54.14		zero
Critical .05 Value .01		1.72 2.26

Newman-Keuls Test in Table 2 indicates statistically significant mean differences at the .01 level between EFL/ESL males and females. This may be interpreted that females exhibit a

higher language anxiety level than do males.

Table 3 also discloses statistically significant mean differences at the .01 level between EFL learners and ESL learners in favor of EFL learners as shown in Table 3. This may be interpreted that EFL subjects seem to experience a higher language anxiety level than do ESL subjects.

Table 3. Mean Differences Between EFL and ESL Subjects in Language Anxiety Level Using Newman-Keuls Test

Specialization Means		ESL 44.18	EFL 52.19
ESL 44.18		zero	8.01**
EFL 52.19			zero
Critical Value	.05		1.72
	.01		2.26

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant interaction between the subjects' sex, specialization in language anxiety level.

ANOVA (2 x 2) in Table 1 shows statistically significant interaction between EFL/ESL learners' sex, specialization in lan-

guage anxiety level together at the .001 level. The F ratio obtained for the differences was large enough to reject this hypothesis.

Since it was necessary to proceed to investigate further the differences concerning interaction, the Newman-Keuls Test was performed on the data. Table 4 reveals statistically significant mean differences at the .01 level between ESL female subjects and EFL female subjects in favor of the latter; statistically significant mean differences were also found at the .01 level between EFL male subjects and EFL females in favor of the latter; and statistically significant mean differences were indicated at the .01 level between ESL males and EFL females in favor of the latter. Table 4 also indicates statistically significant mean differences at the .01 level between EFL males and ESL females in favor of the latter; and statistically significant mean differences were shown at the .01 level between ESL males and ESL females in favor of the latter. FINALLY, statistically significant mean differences were disclosed at the .01 level between ESL males and EFL males in favor of the latter as was made clear in Table 4.

Table 4. Mean Differences Between Sex and Specialization in Language Anxiety Using Newman-Keuls Test

Specialization Sex Means	EFL Males 59.43	ESL Females 48.85	EFL Males 44.95	ESL Females 39.50
EFL Females 59.43	zero	10.58**	14.48**	19.93**
ESL Females 48.85		zero	3.9**	9.35**
EFL Males 44.95			zero	5.45**
ESL Males 39.50				zero
Critical .05 Value .01		1.72 2.26	2.05 2.55	2.25 2.73

Hypothesis Three: There is no significant difference between EFL/ESL subjects with high anxiety mean scores and those with low anxiety mean scores in the attainment of language proficiency.

To test this hypothesis, the whole sample of EFL and ESL subjects was divided into two groups i.e., high language anxiety group and low language anxiety group, according to the median. The t-test for independent samples with unequal numbers disclosed

statistically significant mean differences at the .01 level between EFL subjects with high language anxiety level and those with low language anxiety level in language proficiency. The differences were in favor of EFL subjects with low language anxiety level (t = 12.04) as shown in Table 5.

Table 5. The T-test for Mean Differences Between EFL and ESL Subjects with High and Low Language Anxiety Test Scores in Language Proficiency

Groups	High Lang. Anxiety N	$\bar{x}$	SD	Low Lang. Anxiety N	$\bar{x}$	SD	t
EFL Subjects' Lang. Proficiency	130	23.64	6.10	129	31.83	4.81	F=1.61** t=12.04 t'=2.62 t > t'
ESL Subjects' Lang. Proficiency	236	20.41	4.66	236	24.15	5.95	F=1.63** t=7.63

**p < .01.

The t-test for independent samples with equal numbers also indicated statistically significant mean differences at the .01 level between ESL subjects with high language anxiety level and those with low language anxiety level in language proficiency. The differences were in favor of subjects with low language anxiety level (t = 7.63) as indicated in Table 5.

On the basis of the results presented in Table 5, hypothesis three was rejected.

Hypothesis Four: There is no significant relationship between EFL and ESL language anxiety test scores and language proficiency test scores.

Using Pearson's correlation coefficients, significant correlations were demonstrated. However, these correlations were both negative and weak. They were: -.17 for the EFL group and -.22 for the ESL group. These findings add support to the results presented in Table 5. That is, the higher the language anxiety level, the lower the language proficiency level and the lower the language anxiety level, the higher the attainment of language proficiency.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study will be discussed in terms of its four hypothesis as follows:

1. Results pertinent to differences between male EFL/ESL learners and female EFL/ESL learners in language anxiety.

ANOVA (2 x 2) and Newman-Keuls Test in Tables 1 and 2 revealed significant differences at the .01 level between males

and females in favor of females. This means that female EFL/ESL learners tend to experience higher language anxiety levels than do male EFL/ESL learners. One may argue that language anxiety is more common among females than among males because of the influence of sex role socialization.

This result is consistent with Betz's (1978) who found that math anxiety occurs frequently among college students and that it is more likely to occur among females than among males.

The results also revealed significant differences between ESL and EFL learners in favor of the latter. This may be due to EFL learners' limited experience with the language. EFL learners study the language as a supplementary course and not as their area of specialization. They were more anxious than ESL learners who are taking the language as their area of concentration. Therefore, it is not surprising to find EFL learners experience higher language anxiety levels than do ESL learners.

To add, since EFL learners are not specialized in the language, they may have some erroneous beliefs about language learning. In this concern, Horwitz (1984) put it clearly that a number of EFL students believe nothing should be said in the foreign language until it can be said correctly and that it is not okay to guess an unknown foreign language word. He maintained that beliefs such as these must produce anxiety ... and even excellent foreign language learners make mistakes or forget words.

Moreover, EFL learners' language anxiety may be due to fear of failure. Sarason (1980) indicated that students who are test-anxious in a foreign language class probably experience considerable difficulty and even the brightest and most prepared students often commit mistakes. At this point, some EFL students studying English as a foreign language reported that they go blank prior to taking language tests.

Finally, EFL learners' higher language anxiety level may be attributed to the fact that a large number of EFL learners lack either some necessary aptitude for learning a language or sufficient motivation to do the necessary work for good performance. This point, however, needs further profound research which investigates the predisposing and precipitating factors of EFL learners' language anxiety.

2. Results related to interaction between sex, specialization and language anxiety level.

ANOVA (2 x 2) in Table 1 and Newman-Keuls Test in Table 4 disclosed significant interaction concerning the differences between males and females, and between EFL and ESL learners together in language anxiety. Female EFL and ESL learners were found to exhibit a higher language anxiety level than do EFL and

ESL males.

This may be interpreted that due to the influence of sex role socialization, language anxiety is more common among females regardless of their area of specialization than among males. The result is in agreement with research works on other types of specific anxiety (Betz, 1978; Stent, 1977; and Tobias, 1976).

The results also revealed that male EFL learners experience a higher language anxiety level than do ESL male learners. THIS may be ascribed to EFL learners' limited experience with the language and not to mention, fear of failure (Gordon and SARASON, 1980). It may also be due to EFL learners' erroneous beliefs about foreign language learning (Horwitz, 1984).

In closing, many EFL learners lack either some indispensable aptitude for learning a foreign language or sufficient motivation to do the necessary work required for successful performance, and consequently they become very anxious when taking language tests. This area, however, needs further research to determine the actual factors leading to EFL/ESL learners' language anxiety.

3. Results pertinent to high and low language anxiety levels and high and low language proficiency levels.

The t-test results indicated significant differences at the .01 level between EFL and ESL learners with high language anxiety

levels and those with low language anxiety levels. The differences were in favor of learners with low language anxiety levels.

To clarify, EFL and ESL subjects with high language anxiety levels tended to perform poorly on the ENGLISH language proficiency tests used whereas EFL and ESL subjects with low language anxiety levels outperformed those EFL and ESL subjects with high anxiety levels.

This may be interpreted that anxious learners tend to do poorly on tests. Their anxiety might have influenced their performance and accordingly, they performed poorly on the language test. At this point, Abbott and Wingard (1981, p. 176) maintained that, "assessment which is felt by the pupils as threatening often leads to lowered achievement."

The findings are also consistent with Kleinmann's (1977) who reported that ESL students with high levels of debilitating anxiety attempted different types of grammatical constructions than did less anxious ESL students.

In addition, studies by Steinberg and Horwitz (1984) indicate that the more anxious student tends to avoid attempting difficult messages in the target language. The results are in agreement with research on other types of specific communication

anxiety. Daly and Miller (1975) and Daly (1977) studying writing in a native language have found that students with higher levels of writing anxiety write shorter compositions and qualify their writing less than their calmer counterparts do.

Moreover, research work by Sarason (1961); Phillips (1963); and Sarason and Stoops (1978), indicate that anxiety has an effect on students' performance or achievement. They found that academic performance seems to be poor for individuals with high anxiety levels whereas individuals with low anxiety levels tend to perform well academically.

To end, Betz (1978) also found that there was a general tendency for higher levels of anxiety to be associated with lower achievement test scores.

4. Results related to the relationship between language anxiety test scores and language proficiency test scores.

Pearson's correlation coefficients were found to be significant at the .01 level. However, the correlations were weak and negative: -.17 for the EFL group and -.22 for the ESL group. The significance of the correlation coefficient may be due to the large sample size used in the study.

To clarify, these finding add support to the results concerning EFL/ESL subjects' language anxiety levels and their language proficiency levels. Highly anxious subjects tended to perform poorly whereas subjects with low language anxiety levels tended to do well on the language tests used.

In fact, there is a great deal of research showing a negative relationship between test anxiety and school achievement and test performance (Hill and Sarason, 1966). Gardner and Lambert (F1972) have also surmised that the relationship between anxiety and the attainment of proficiency in a target language may be very indirect and therefore weak.

To close, Scovel (1978) argues that scholars have been unable to establish a clear-cut relationship between anxiety and overall foreign language achievement. He attributes the discrepant finding at least in part to the inconsistency of anxiety measures used and concludes that it is perhaps premature to relate anxiety tot the global and comprehensive task of language acquisition. This area, however, requires more profound research.

CONCLUSION

Language anxiety was found to be more common among female

EFL and ESL learners than among males. EFL learners, both male and female, were found to experience a higher language anxiety level than ESL learners. Accordingly, since EFL learners are required to study at least one language course per year, highly language anxious students may need assistance and support in order to attain their educational goals.

EFL and ESL learners' performance was also found to be influenced by their language anxiety level. EFL and ESL learners with high language anxiety levels did poorly on the language tests used whereas students with low language anxiety levels outperformed those with high language anxiety levels. In fact, EFL/ESL learners' language anxiety levels can be alleviated at least to an extent, by a supportive and an understanding EFL/ESL teacher who will acknowledge students' feelings of helplessness and offer valuable and actual suggestions for attaining foreign/second language confidence.

An interaction was found between EFL/ESL learners' sex and specialization in language anxiety. Pearson's correlation coefficients were negative as well as weak for both the language anxiety test scores and the language proficiency test scores.

It should be acknowledged that this study provides only the first attempt to investigate language anxiety among EFL/ESL lear-

ners at university level in Egypt and its influence on their language proficiency level. Accordingly, further profound research is needed concerning the origin of English language anxiety and its effects on EFL/ESL learners' language proficiency levels.

Finally, further studies are also needed to investigate the predisposing and precipitating factors leading to EFL/ESL learners' language anxiety. What is important is that teachers of ENGLISH as a foreign or second language should help anxious students cope with the existing anxiety-provoking situation and make the learning situation less stressful.

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